ON PRIMATES, PROCESS & ONLINE PETITIONS

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Category: Opinions

Vrouyr Makalian LLB, Montreal, 28 May 2013

It was not the typical text message one gets at 10pm on a Saturday. *"Vrouyr!"*, my friend wrote,*"Bagrat has been kicked out!"*

"No way! How? Why?!"

The Canadian Diocese of the Armenian Holy Apostolic Church had, in fact, just decided to replace Bishop Bagrat Galstanyan as Primate of the Canadian Armenian Church, following a weekend vote of its Diocesan Delegates Assembly.

It's hard to explain why two twenty-something Canadian-Armenians, whose visits to Church are generally limited to the "Christmas-Easter-Wedding" trinity, would so passionately engage in a back-and-forth about the renewal of the Bishop's mandate, of all things.

Granted, Bagrat Srpazan is no ordinary Bishop. He is charismatic, eloquent, approachable, and probably one of our community's most talented soccer players. His efforts to promote Armenian culture in Canada and develop social services also resonate with the Apostolic-for-cultural-and-not-necessarily-religious-reasons crowd, of which I'm a vocal member.

Whether or not Bagrat Srpazan successfully fulfilled his mandate, however, is a question that I cannot answer. From my vantage point, he has certainly strengthened our community, but who knows what his mandate actually entailed? On what basis was his tenure evaluated? Were there clear criteria set out to do so?

Of course, this is not the discussion we're having. There might be perfectly valid reasons for the Diocesan Assembly's decision not to renew the Primate's mandate. We don't know. It's assumed that we don't need to know. Transparency and accountability to the broader membership, after all, have never been the strong suits of our community institutions.

We are instead hearing bits and pieces of information through the grapevines, mostly centered on notorious community figures and their vendettas.

"You know who's behind this, right?"

"He's been trying to get rid of him for a while now."

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Clearly, it's business as usual in the Armenian community.

Except that it isn't. It is certainly not the first time that an intelligent and worthy individual is evinced from an important position in the community through traditional backroom politics, but never before, in my memory, have such maneuvers targeted someone as popular and as generally respected as Bishop Galstanyan.

And never before, more importantly, have Armenians felt so entitled to voice their opinions on the matter. Thank the internet and the countless genocide recognition petitions it has brought us, perhaps. By Monday morning, I had already received 3 emails and half a dozen Facebook requests to sign a petition urging the Catholicos "not to ratify the decision made to replace Bishop Galstanyan". By 5:30PM, it had amassed 560 signatures and showed no signs of slowing down.

I signed it, too.

I signed it despite not knowing who was behind it, and despite feeling a little uncomfortable that its anonymous authors had ambitiously named themselves "The Canadian Armenian Community".

I signed it despite the haunting thought that even this very petition may well be an element of the same backroom politics I am oblivious to and seek to denounce.

I signed it, also, despite my own technocratic attachment to the supremacy of due process which implies a decision by vote by a competent body – a vote which, after all, effectively took place and therefore bears the *prima facie* stamp of legitimacy.

I signed it because I have absolutely no expectation that the decision-makers will come forward and provide explanations, valid and justified as they may possibly be.

I signed the petition because, in the absence of such explanations, it allowed me and my fellow Canadian-Armenians to openly and personally provide our own. Because, after years of complacently tolerating the reign of backroom obscurity over community affairs, Canadian-Armenians have used this petition to catapult their not-always-representative leaders into the 21st century and provide them a lesson in transparency.

Here's hoping that the lesson is learned. In this day and age, transparency, above all else, begets legitimacy.